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Exploring self-regulatory strategies for vocabulary learning among Chinese EFL learners

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Abstract

Strategy use and self-efficacy are the crucial elements for defining self-regulated learners. This study attempts to investigate the use of self-regulated learning strategies as well as motivational beliefs for vocabulary learning among a group of 38 pre-university Chinese EFL learners studying at University of Malaysia. Findings indicated that cognitive deep processing strategies and meta-cognitive strategies are rarely applied by the learners; besides, learners' low self-efficacy and motivation might be due to the lack of strategy knowledge. The study suggests that there is a pressing need to enhance the Chinese EFL learners' self-regulation in vocabulary learning through strategy instruction.

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1. Introduction

Self-regulation in academic learning has been intensively investigated outside the ESL/ EFL context. However, the similar terms have been gaining increasing attention in language education since the early 1970s, such as, Self-Directed Language Learning (SDLL), learner autonomy, and self-instruction etc (McDonough, 2001). One of the basic justifications cutting cross these concepts is to assist learners to learn how to learn and to develop their independent learning capacity (Benson, 2001).

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) has been exerting a strong influence on the research area of learning strategies (Benson, 2001). Different from the metacognitive view of learning strategies, which focuses on cognitive thinking skills and processes, SRL emphasizes the interdependent relationships between motivational beliefs (i.e., self-efficacy) and cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Duckworth, Akerman, MacGregor, Salter, & Vorhaus, 2009).

In the literature of vocabulary acquisition in language education, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) play an essential role in developing learners' self-regulatory capability in learning vocabulary (Graves & Fink, 2007). However, most studies on VLS focus on cognitive strategies, while less concern was given to metacognitive and affective factors of vocabulary learning (Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003). Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of SRL, this study attempts to investigate cognitive, metacognitive and motivational dimensions of self-regulation in vocabulary learning among a group of Chinese EFL learners in order to provide some insights into vocabulary instruction in language education. There are three research questions postulated in this study: (1) what are the

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cognitive vocabulary learning strategies used by the learners? (2) What are the metacognitive self-regulatory strategies used by the learners? (3) What are the learners' motivational beliefs in learning vocabulary?

2. Methods

The participants for this study are 38 Chinese EFL learners studying at an English proficiency course in order to further their degree study at University of Malaya. The students were grouped into the five classes according to the results of the English placement test.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are adopted to answer the three research questions. First, an adapted questionnaire developed by Gu and Johnson (1996) is used to study the students' use of vocabulary learning strategies. A pilot test was conducted with 52 Chinese EFL learners who were undertaking a pre-university English course in Malaysian universities to identify the reliability level of question items. The results of Cronbach's Alpha reliability test suggested that the constructs had acceptable internal consistency, particularly for those constructs with a smaller number of items. The questionnaire was then delivered to 38 participants. Descriptive statistics are used to assess the students' use of cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, and both mean and standard deviation of each item are calculated using SPSS.

Second, a structured interview was conducted to investigate the participants' metacognitive and motivational aspects of self-regulation in vocabulary learning. 14 students out of the 38 participants in five classes voluntarily participated in the interview. Some interview questions on motivational and metacognitive dimensions were adapted from the general interview questions developed by Gu (2003). All the question items were verified by two English teachers and two Chinese EFL learners. The students were first required to provide written responses to the question items. Then, a follow-up clarification is conducted to identify the written statements which are (1) short and not clear; (2) not really relevant to the questions, and (3) contradictory in the ideas. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used in analyzing the data.

3. Results

3.1. Students' use of vocabulary learning strategies

An overview of vocabulary learning strategies used by the entire group is compiled in Table 1. A total nineteen vocabulary learning strategies were categorized into six groups, i.e., dictionary, guessing, memory, note taking, activation and metacognitive vocabulary strategies. The ranking of the strategies are according to the mean of each strategy usage.

Table 1. Ranking of the vocabulary learning strategies

Categories	Strategies	Mean	SD	Rank
Dictionary strategies	Dictionary strategies for comprehension	3.86	.69	1
	Dictionary look-up strategies	3.49	.88	3
	Extended dictionary strategies	2.89	.78	17
Notetaking strategies	Meaning- oriented note taking strategies	3.66	.73	2
	Usage- oriented note taking strategies	3.43	.81	5
	Oral repetition	3.47	.78	4
Memory rehearsal	Visual repetition	3.24	.77	8
	Using word list	3.02	.78	15
	Guessing using background knowledge	3.41	.82	6
Guessing	Guessing using linguistics cues	3.27	.73	7
Categories	Strategies	Mean	SD	Rank
Memory encoding	Contextual encoding	3.24	.85	9
	Auditory encoding	3.03	.72	13
	Visual encoding	3.08	.77	11
	Association/ elaboration	3.02	.69	14
	Word-structure	2.95	.73	16
	Semantic encoding	2.85	.82	18

Activation strategies	Activation	3.22	.74	10
Metacognitive strategies	Selective attention	3.07	.69	12
	Self- initiation	2.66	.39	20

The results indicated that the least used strategies for Chinese ESL learners are self-initiation ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.39$); extended dictionary strategies use ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.78$), word structure ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.73$) and semantic encoding ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.82$).; while the mostly used strategies are dictionary strategies for comprehension ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.69$), meaning-oriented note taking strategies ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.73$), and oral repetition ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.78$). According to the depth of processing theory (Craik & Tulving, 1975), the findings indicated that shallow processing strategies, such as repetition strategies, dictionary used mainly for looking up the meaning of a word are still dominant among the Chinese learners. In contrast, the deep processing strategies, such as, semantic encoding and word structure which are advocated in the literature are less preferred by the learners. Particularly, self-initiation strategy which indicates learners' willingness to take control or responsibility for their learning is the least used strategy among the learners.

3.2. Metacognitive learning strategies used by the learners?

Metacognitive self-regulatory strategies focus on goal-setting, planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation strategies. The results for each aspect are summarized below.

3.2.1 Goal-setting and planning

The responses of 11 learners indicated that they did not set a goal for their vocabulary learning. During the follow-up clarification, most of the participants stated that they usually looked up dictionary when encountering a new word or before memorizing the new word. While only three participants stated that they set learning goals and plan vocabulary learning, e.g., "remember 20- 30 words per day" (p4.2.2.1); "repeatedly memorizing words everyday" (p14.2.2.1); "first plan what I want to learn, such as doing vocabulary exercise, learn 20 new words every day and when to start, how long to study" (p13.2.2.1). Besides, most of the respondents indicated that they did not purposely try new strategies. Only three students clearly identified that they purposely used strategies to learn vocabulary, e.g., "learn English vocabulary in magazine" (p4.2.2.3); "use English-English dictionary, writing in English. Besides, listening to English news sometimes" (p6.2.2.3); "read newspaper, watch movies and listen to music" (p14.2.2.3). Only one student mentioned that he tried memory encoding strategies, such as, "imaginary, word association" (p11.2.2.3).

Goal setting and planning are closely related concepts in SRL. The responses given by the participants about goal setting and planning for vocabulary learning are quite vague and general. It might indicate that they are lack of strategy awareness as well as knowledge and skills in vocabulary learning.

3.2.2. Monitoring strategies

Total 13 respondents stated that they did not keep record of their progress in vocabulary learning. Only one respondent stated that:

"On weekdays, I usually learn 20 new words every day, and then on weekend I review the words I learned during the week and mark those I could not remember. I'll review them again the following day" (p8.2.2.4)

Moreover, referring to the interview questions on monitoring strategy use during reading, 6 respondents stated that they looked up a dictionary when encountering a difficult word during reading, for example, "I think I usually use a dictionary. I know this is not good idea, but I feel learning word is hard for me. So I have to use it" (p12.2.2.5); "I can check the word in computer then got its meaning" (p5.2.2.5). Some of them stated that they usually guess the meaning first, then use dictionary, e.g., "I think guessing the word first, and then using dictionary to check if your guess is right or wrong. Then you know the meaning of the word" (p13.2.2.5)

It is in line with the results of strategy use survey, the learners most frequently use dictionary for comprehension purpose, that is, look up the meaning of word rather than using dictionary as a resource to exploit the information of a word so as to expand their vocabulary knowledge. Besides, regular review and using notebook to record word information were not reported by the respondents.

3.2.3. Self-evaluation

The responses of the 10 participants indicated that they were not sure of which words or expressions were important to learn, e.g., “I don’t know which words are worth remembering. I just try to remember all the words I see” (p3.2.2.6); “just feelings, sometimes, I don’t know (p12.2.2.6)

Only four respondents clearly stated that “identifying if it is a key word in an essay” (p4.2.2.6) and “read a lot and find if it is used many times” (p6.2.2.6); “if it is used widely in daily life, I will remember” (p5.2.2.6); similarly “I’ll see if the word is often used and useful to express meaning” (p14.2.2.6)

As for evaluating their own vocabulary, ten respondents stated that they did not evaluate their vocabulary. Besides, the evaluation methods stated by the other students were very general, such as, “when reading an article, I notice how much vocabulary I could understand”. (p7.2.2.8). None of the respondents stated that using self-check or self-test in their vocabulary learning.

The above responses regarding evaluation in terms of vocabulary learning indicated that the respondents had little awareness in evaluation of vocabulary learning and strategy use.

3.3. Motivational beliefs in learning vocabulary

Nine respondents stated that they felt they were not good at learning vocabulary, while the other five respondents stated that they were good in certain aspects, e.g., “I’m good at pronunciation” (p6.2.2.6). It might indicate the perceptions of most respondents on their capabilities in vocabulary learning were low. Furthermore, nine respondents stated that they were interested in learning English vocabulary. One respondent stated that she was very interested in learning English vocabulary. The other four stated that they were not interested at all. However, different from the responses on interest in learning English vocabulary, nine participants stated that they were low motivated in learning vocabulary; and one participant stated that he was not motivated at all. Only four participants stated that they were motivated in learning vocabulary.

The follow up interview showed that though most of the respondents recognized the importance of vocabulary in their language learning, and they showed interest in learning it. However, in practice, they regarded learning vocabulary as a tiresome memorizing task; thus, motivation in learning words was low.

Besides, eight participants think that it is hard to learn English words. The difficulties stated by the respondents, e.g., “I always forget new words. I didn’t read enough and can not use the words in a proper way” (p6.2.2.1); “most difficulties are remembering and using and word” (p1.2.2.1). It might reveal that the difficulties confronted learners might reduce their self-efficacy in vocabulary learning, and it is likely related to their lack of vocabulary knowledge and the ways of how to learn vocabulary effectively. It also indicates that lack of knowledge and strategies and low motivation are impediment for vocabulary learning.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the research questions, the results of the study are summarized and discussed in three aspects. First, a variety of vocabulary strategy use is lacking among the learners, especially, review, note taking, and memory encoding strategies, which are evident in both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Besides, the low processing vocabulary learning strategies (i.e., oral repetition, meaning-oriented note taking and using dictionary for comprehension purpose) are still dominant among the learners, which is in line with the findings of the previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese EFL learners (i.e., Zhang, 2005). However, deep processing strategies (i.e., word structure and semantic grouping) are less used by the learners. Furthermore, the sharp difference between dictionary use for comprehension purposes and for extended purposes indicated limited use of the dictionary among the participants. Fan’s study with a group of Chinese Hong Kong EFL learners (2000) also found that information given about a word (i.e., collocation, pronunciation, frequency, appropriateness) tended to be ignored by the students when looking up a new word in a dictionary. Besides, the difference between meaning-oriented note taking strategies and usage-oriented note taking strategies also shows that students tended to focus on the form and meaning of a word rather than the usage of a word in a context. This was also found in a study done by Tang (2001). From his observations in Chinese college English classrooms, he found that upon learning a new word, the students merely stored its meaning in memory, and made no attempt to use it actively.

Second, metacognitive learning strategies (i.e., goal-setting, planning, self-monitoring and evaluation) are also less applied by the learners. It might indicate that learners are lack of knowledge and performance of strategies for vocabulary learning. This resonates with the findings on metacognitive strategy training by Zhao (2009) who found a lack of metacognitive strategy use in vocabulary learning among Chinese EFL learners. Third, though most of the learners recognize the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition, low self-efficacy and low motivation might be due to the lack of knowledge and skills in vocabulary learning, which in turn affect their strategy performance. Therefore, the findings of the study suggest that the learners need to engage in more active use of cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, and more importantly to enhance their metacognitive awareness and control of the use of the strategies so as to improve their perception (i.e., self-efficacy) and motivation in vocabulary leaning.

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